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ABSTRACT

In a study of writing perceptions held by college faculty in disciplines other than English, 81 faculty members indicated whether each of 67 student writing errors bothered them a great deal, a little, or not at all. Results showed that teachers did not strongly object to errors apparently produced by carelessness or by ignorance of finer distinctions in English usage, but they did react very negatively to violations of status markers (e.g., "brung" for "brought") or of unequivocal conventions. Although the small number of respondents prevented conclusive identification of distinct patterns in responses, the results showed that female instructors had strongly negative reactions to almost twice as many errors as males and that, of the three schools sampled, the arts and sciences proved the most critical, followed closely by education, and trailed by agriculture and business. The study suggested that teachers in disciplines other than English see writing as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. (MM)

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Error Recognition: Implications For Interdisciplinary Writing Instruction

Joseph M. Williams, in his CCC essay, "The Phenomenology of Error," addresses two problems which trouble many of us engaged in the teaching of composition--what exactly does error mean in language, and exactly which errors should consistently be marked in student writing, or, more precisely, what standard of error identification should be used.[1] Williams argues, by making his essay a test of reader recognition of error, that context either increases or decreases our sensitivity to error, and that our sensitivity is heightened enormously and perhaps artificially when reading a student paper. Additionally, he indirectly raises the question of exactly what error means in language use; a question he avoids answering directly, but which he approaches by creating a matrix of violation and response possibilities. In a similar investigation, Maxine Hairston, in her College English essay "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage," presents the result of a survey which attempts to identify and codify reader perception of error.[2] While the ideas in these articles are fascinating for any teacher of writing, their immediate importance is heightened further as they are considered in the face of the growing movement to develop interdisciplinary writing programs.

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In an attempt to discover more about the perceptions of writing held by faculty in disciplines other than English, in the spring of 1982 I distributed, with her permission, Hairston's 67 item instrument to 127 faculty members at Tarleton State University. The 81 responses I received provided some interesting points of comparison with those of Hairston's non-academic group. The results also suggested several interesting conclusions about the concepts of error held by academicians outside the English department.

My interest in the concepts of "good" and "bad" writing held by members of other disciplines began several years ago when I attempted to train a group of faculty, one from each department, to evaluate student papers holistically. The purpose of this effort was an experimental, campus wide, junior level proficiency examination. Without going into the details of that experiment, I would like to recount a very few of my experiences in training readers. I began with copies of ten student papers, all using the same pattern of organization. Five of these, I felt, were clearly superior; five were obviously failures. I felt that first establishing the extremes would facilitate later efforts to respond to papers falling between the two. I distributed the papers, allowed time for reading, then asked for an initial ranking of them. While I had intended for the high degree of agreement to bolster confidence, I was quite surprised to see some of the best work being placed near the bottom of the scale. Trying

to remain as non-judgemental as possible, I then asked respondants to explain their placement. Papers which were in my view superior were failed because they contained a misspelled word, because the writer used first person pronouns, because some paragraphs had more or fewer than five sentences, and because there were more than five paragraphs in the papers. Although the group, after many sessions, eventually attained a very respectable degree of uniformity of response, it was immediately evident that at least initially radically different concepts of quality and error were held. Let me also make clear that I do not mean to ridicule either my colleagues or their views; they are sincere, competent people who often publish accounts of their work in their fields. However, I was disturbed by the gap between what is emphasized in most composition classes and the perception of quality writing held by my colleagues.

In order to investigate this gap more systematically, in the spring of 1982 I distributed Maxine Hairston's test instrument to all full time faculty on campus except those in the Department of English and Languages. Although the responses (unlike Hairston's) were completely anonymous, each of the 81 respondants did identify his/her department, academic rank, age range (20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, or 61+), and sex. Table 1 presents the breakdown of responses by category. The total number of responses was greater than I had anticipated (perhaps in part because of the personal letter accompanying

each questionnaire and perhaps in part because I made quite clear that this was not a test, but rather an attempt to form an impression of what the respondant found bothersome).[3] The response rate was also fairly representative of the various categories identified.

After all responses were received, they were transferred to standard answer sheets to be broken down and tabulated by computer. For each item the total response for each of the three possible responses was reported along with the percentage response frequency of the total. This was repeated for each of the 27 sub-categories. For example, for item 21, quoted in note 3, of the 81 responses no one responded with "Does not bother me," one responded with "Bothers me a little," and eighty responded with "Bothers me a lot." On this item the percentage response frequency was 0%, 1.2%, and 98.7%.

There were three objectives in the administration of this instrument: identification of a total "high" cluster of errors, that is, those usages perceived by the faculty as a whole as bothersome; identification of a total "low" cluster of errors, those usages seldom perceived as errors; and, if possible, identification of significant variation in perception of error among the various sub-categories. Let me discuss these in order.

The identification of a total high cluster of errors immediately became troublesome because of the limited possibility of response. Many people obviously felt

frustrated by their being limited to one of three responses; frequently they attempted to overcome this by checking the third response ("Bothers me a lot") two or three times to indicate the intensity of their reaction. Other, obviously more phlegmatic souls, took the middle ground from the beginning and saved the third response for extreme cases; consequently, I decided that response frequency to the first possibility ("Does not bother me") was more significant than the often fuzzy distinction between the second and third responses. Using this system, there were 29 items (two were discarded because of typing errors) that 10% or fewer of the respondants did not find troublesome.

In this high cluster of 27 items, there were 13 different violations of propriety broken down as follows:

Punctuation - 5
Sentence Fragment - 3
Subject-Verb Agreement - 3
Parallelism - 2
Modification - 2
Double Negative - 2
Tense Shift - 2
Capitalization - 2
Illiteracy - 2 (i.e., "of" for "have" with should or would)
Run-on - 1
Lack of Subordination - 1
Pronoun Case - 1
Verb Form - 1

With perhaps the exception of the objection to the lack of subordination, none of the items on this list is particularly

surprising. Using the same system of identifying high cluster errors, there is also a very high degree of correlation between the errors identified as belonging in this group by Hairston's sample of non-academic professionals and this group of academicians. There is total agreement on the seriousness of those items Hairston refers to as "status markers", such as "brung" for "brought", double negatives, and objective pronouns in subject slots.

In the low cluster--items marked "Does not bother me" by 48% or more of the respondants--there are only four items: use of the passive voice, diction ("most unique"), pronoun number agreement ("everyone-they"), and the use of a colon preceding a series of predicate nominatives after _are_. While these usages, with the possible exception of the passive construction, would probably be called to the writer's attention by most composition teachers, these teachers would probably also agree that these violations would not fall into the fearful category of "gross mechanical error."

The 32 remaining items fell into the middle range--more than 10% of the population responded "Does not bother me", but fewer than 48% responded this way. Found in this group were such usages as confusing _sit_ with _set_, "different than," "the situation is when," and the confusion of _effect_ and _affect_. Certain pronoun usage problems ("every person-they,", "a person-them"), failure to form the possessive ("our companys record"), lack of agreement between noun and modifier

("these kind"), verb usage ("if I was"), and confusion of contraction and possessive (its and it's) also occurred in this group. However, there were six areas of overlap with the high group which deserve closer examination.

For instance, as mentioned above, the most frequently occurring error in the high cluster was punctuation; this is also true of the mid-range cluster; however, an examination of the specific items in the two groups reveals several important differences. In order of occurrence, the punctuation errors in the high group were lack of quotation marks around a direct quotation, failure to set off an appositive, failure to separate serial adjectives, failure to set off an introductory adverb clause, and the use of a comma to separate a noun clause used as a direct object from the verb. In the mid-range group, there were objections to such punctuation violations as the failure to complete a set of quotation marks, failure to complete a set of parentheses, using a question mark after a declarative sentence, and the failure to set off a non-restrictive modifier. The contrast between the two is rather interesting: the violations in the high group are either clear violations of simple and oft repeated rules of punctuation (and thus immediately noticeable), or errors which result in either a confused or a difficult reading. On the other hand, those in the mid-range group seem either to reveal carelessness rather than ignorance (failure to complete the set of parentheses) or to involve more sophisticated knowledge

of punctuation proprieties (the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers).

A similar situation is seen when considering reactions to sentence fragments. The high group included short word clusters with no verb form ("A fight against unscrupulous opponents," "Cheap labor and low costs," and "In spite of administrative warnings") while the mid-range group contained only one fragment, a rather long series of words with a verb form and a dependent clause ("One of the problems being that young people are leaving"). Again this suggests a general familiarity with a convention and a recognition of its violation when it is clearly exemplified as well as the tendency to accept as tolerable a structure which approaches completeness.

One final example, problems of subject-verb agreement, will illustrate the constant pattern which emerges as overlaps of high and mid-range groups are compared. In the high group, three violations of subject-verb agreement occurred: singular subjects connected with or followed by a plural verb, a plural subject immediately followed by a singular verb, and a singular subject immediately followed by a plural verb. In the mid-range group, there are two instances of subject-verb disagreement: a compound subject following a singular verb ("Enclosed in his personnel file is his discharge papers and job references"), and a plural verb following a plural prepositional object in a phrase modifying the singular subject of the verb ("Everyone of them are"). As with problems with punctuation

and sentence fragments, the tendency here is to recognize and react strongly to obvious violations of propriety, but to show more tolerance for more subtle violations of the same standard. There is also a marked tendency to react less strongly to "errors" which might be heard in the casual speech of an educated speaker.

The first two objectives of the study--identification of high and low error types--seem, in some measure, to have been achieved. Those usages least likely to be perceived as troublesome are those often dear to the writing teacher's heart: niceties of diction such as "most unique," troublesome indefinite singular pronouns such as "everyone" followed by plural pronouns, and stylistic concerns such as passive constructions. Usages drawing the strongest negative reactions seemed to fall into two categories: egregious violations of "status markers" ("he brung," "we was," or "Him and Richard were") or simple, unequivocal violations of conventions studied early and repeatedly (a fragment such as "In spite of administrative warnings"). Considerably more tolerance was exhibited for errors construed as careless rather than as perverse or as obvious displays of ignorance and for errors requiring some level of sophistication in their identification particularly if, as mentioned above, they might approximate ordinary speech of educated speakers.

Achievement of the third objective--to attempt to discover patterns of response extant in and peculiar to the various

sub-categories of respondants--was less conclusive, because of sample size, than the first two. However, these results may be somewhat instructive. In terms of consciousness of error and of strength of negative reaction to error, women reacted almost twice as strongly as men (placing 47 items in the high cluster as compared to 24 for men). Of the three schools sampled--Arts and Sciences, Education, and Agriculture and Business--faculty in Arts and Sciences proved most critical (placing 33 items in the high cluster), followed closely by those in Education (31), trailed by those in Agriculture and Business (27). Broken down by department (not a particularly significant classification because of the number of respondants in some departments, see Table 1), the number of items placed in high cluster was, alphabetically, Agriculture - 18, Agricultural Education - 43, Biology (including Nursing) - 32, Business - 35, Education and Psychology - 41, Fine Arts - 40, Home Economics - 49, Industrial Education - 36, Mathematics and Physics - 39, Physical Education - 45, Physical Science - 45, and Social Science - 26. A breakdown by academic rank shows Lecturers - 37, Instructors - 37, Assistant Professors - 28, Associate Professors - 39, and Professors - 28. Distribution by age reveals the 20-30 year range with 36 errors in the high cluster, the 31-40 range with 22, 41-50 with 35, 51-60 (a population of one) with 55, and 61+ with 23. Consequently, if all these are accepted--as they certainly should not be--at face value, the following composites

emerge: the faculty member most likely to respond negatively to writing error is a female associate professor, 51-60 years old, who teaches Home Economics in the school of Arts and Sciences; the faculty member most tolerant of error is a male assistant or full professor, 31-40, who teaches Agriculture in the school of Agriculture and Business. Let me hasten to add, that like the Average American, both composites are only numerical constructs.

Many of the respondants chose to add comments at the end of the instrument, and, in many cases, these provided valuable insight into colleagues' perception of writing. One honest but troubled chemist wrote, "I am bothered by the fact that some of these don't bother me very much." Much more typical were responses such as, "Most of the errors in this questionnaire annoy me to the extent that I circle them when they appear in student papers. Such errors only affect the student's grade when they obscure meaning." There are several implications of such comments for those concerned with making the teaching of writing an interdisciplinary activity. Perhaps the most important of these is the implicit contrast in attitude between composition teachers and teachers in other disciplines; teachers in disciplines other than English quite obviously see writing as a means to an end rather than the end itself as writing teachers often do. This generalization would seem to be supported by the identification of errors seen as most and least objectionable by the respondants in

this study. As has been noted above, errors creating confusion or obviously violating simple usage conventions were more often perceived as serious errors than those--often identical in kind--which were less obvious violations or which might probably be heard in the speech of educated speakers. That these teachers see writing only as an enabling discipline is clear; however, this is far from saying that writing teachers should take the same simplistic view.

The success of any attempt to establish an interdisciplinary writing program, or, perhaps more realistically, to establish an interdisciplinary attitude in which writing is seen as an important feature of every course, is likely to be dependent upon the resolution of the means-end controversy. Ideally, faculty in every discipline should be trained to recognize the potential marvels inherent in written language; practically, a compromise may be in order. If the majority of students in beginning writing classes concentrate, as they most certainly will, in disciplines other than English, then perhaps a change in attitude on the part of writing teachers is in order. While I certainly do not mean to suggest that a return to prescriptive, formulaic approaches to writing is needed, it might well be that a slightly less cavalier approach to usage conventions is not amiss. The implementation of this change might range from a reevaluation of the models examined in the writing class to a more rigorous adherence to standards of acceptability for finished student writing. This certainly

does not mean a rejection of the valuable work on teaching composition done in recent years, particularly that done with pre-writing strategies stressing writing as process; however, we would do well to keep in mind that our success as writing teachers is largely determined by the writing our students subsequently produce for our colleagues in other disciplines, and, as this study has shown, our colleagues' perceptions of quality are not entirely nor consistently ours.

Notes

[1]XXXII (May 1981), 152-68.

[2]43 (Dec. 1981), 794-806.

[3]I will not reproduce the entire instrument; for those who are interested it is presented in Professor Hairston's CE article, pp. 800-806. The form provides for one of three responses as in the following item 21:

21. When Mitchell moved, he brung his secretary with him.

Does not bother me___ Bothers me a little___ Bothers me a lot___

Table 1

Respondants By Category

DEPARTMENT		AGE	
Agriculture	7	20-30	3
Agricultural Education	2	31-40	25
Biology	8	41-50	43
Business	11	51-60	1
Education	10	61+	8
Fine Arts	6		
Home Economics	4	SEX	
Industrial Education	4	Male	57
Mathematics & Physics	8	Female	24
Physical Education	1		
Physical Science	6	SCHOOL	
Social Science	14	Agriculture & Business	28
		Education	17
RANK		Arts & Sciences	36
Lecturer	4		
Instructor	14	TOTAL	81
Assistant Professor	38		
Associate Professor	11		
Professor	14		